

## COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
September 29, 2016

### OCEAN CONNECTORS: BIRD AND HABITAT PROJECT

Project No. 16-015-01  
Project Manager: Deborah Ruddock

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$20,000 to The Ocean Foundation for the Ocean Connectors: Bird and Habitat Project in San Diego County.

**LOCATION:** San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge, City of San Diego

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Coastal Resource Enhancement

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#### **EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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#### **RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed twenty thousand dollars (\$20,000) to The Ocean Foundation (“Foundation”) for the Ocean Connectors Program project to undertake educational habitat restoration activities within the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge located in the City of San Diego. Prior to the disbursement of funds, the Foundation shall submit for review and written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, including budget and schedule, and any contractors to be employed for these tasks.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding coastal resource enhancement.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.

3. The Ocean Foundation is a nonprofit organization existing under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”

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### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Under the guidance of staff from The Ocean Foundation’s Ocean Connectors program and its partner U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service (“FWS”), approximately 700 students and their families will participate in educational and restoration activities on approximately two acres of coastal wetland, river, and upland habitats within the FWS San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge (“Refuge”). See location maps attached as Exhibit 1. Participants will remove litter, weed invasive plants, and revegetate the site with 700 native plants to assure the restoration and protection of habitat and help improve water quality. In addition to the direct benefits to local habitat, the project will provide multiple off-site benefits to nearby communities, migratory and endangered wildlife, and the ocean. Ocean Connectors and FWS staff will conduct a comprehensive evaluation process to determine quantifiable outcomes.

The proposed project will focus on migratory birds and climate change. This ensures that the project goes beyond short-term outcomes to promote awareness of and preparation and adaptation for climate change affecting the entire South San Diego Bay.

Participants include 6<sup>th</sup> grade students in the National School District, which encompasses the National City K-6 schools. National City is a disadvantaged community located proximate to the restoration site and has minimal access to parks and green spaces (San Diego Association of Governments, 2010). The city is in the top ten percent of zip-codes statewide for combined impacts of pollution and population vulnerabilities (California Office of Environmental Health, 2013). According to City-Data.com, approximately 34% of National City residents live in households with incomes below the federal poverty level.

Ocean Connectors Program, a project of the Washington D.C.-based The Ocean Foundation, uses the San Diego Bay, and its diverse ecosystems, as a living tool to inspire children and their families to explore the coast, helping to foster a future generation of environmental leaders (Exhibit 2).

### **Project Elements**

The proposed project includes the following elements:

- Litter abatement and invasive plant removal over two acres of coastal habitat. Activities will directly help to reduce coastal pollution and improve habitat for migratory birds.
- Installation of 700 native plants along river corridor, upland, and wetland habitats. Native plants will contribute to improving coastal water quality through water filtration, drought tolerance, and prevention of further erosion and sedimentation of the Otay River.

FWS is responsible for ongoing management and supervision of the site. All maintenance, including watering, future planting, and weed and litter abatement, will be coordinated and supervised by FWS personnel. Project participants will water the native plants initially after planting, and water is available at the site for continued irrigation by FWS. Outside volunteers and students from other outreach programs also will contribute to year-round habitat

improvements to increase the likelihood of success. FWS is an active partner in designing unique educational resources, materials, and exercises that comprise the sixth grade curriculum focused on migratory birds.

The project is supported by the National School District, FWS, and U. S National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration National Marine Fisheries Service (Exhibit 3).

**Site Description:** The Ocean Connectors Bird and Habitat Project will be undertaken in National School District classrooms and within the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge at the end of 13<sup>th</sup> Street in San Diego, California. This U.S.-Mexico border region is heavily impacted by pollution from the surrounding cities of San Diego, National City, Chula Vista, and Tijuana. The project site also is located on the Pacific Flyway migratory corridor, which will be a key topic covered in the Ocean Connectors classroom curriculum.

Restoration activities take place entirely within the area of the Refuge dedicated to the FWS Habitat Heroes outdoor environmental education program established in 2003 for the benefit of local students. The program's primary focus is to address the issues of invasive plants and stormwater pollution. Program activities include mapping native and non-native plants, invasive plant species removal, and native plant re-vegetation.

The approximately two-acre site proposed for this project is disturbed, lacks native plant growth, and is dominated by non-native and invasive chrysanthemum, star thistle, and ice plant. The FWS goal for this area is to help mitigate pollution impacts through re-creation of high-quality coastal sage scrub, wetland, and stream corridor habitats.

The proposed project also will help beautify a short segment of the Bayshore Bikeway, a recreational trail being developed through a multi-city collaboration in San Diego County. The trail, which functions as the California Coastal Trail in the area, will eventually extend 24 miles around San Diego Bay.

**Project History:** Ocean Connectors has been in existence since 2005, and has been a sponsored project of Washington D.C. – based The Ocean Foundation since 2009. The Ocean Foundation/Ocean Connectors Program was awarded funding from the Coastal Conservancy for the first time in 2014 as part of the agency's Explore the Coast grant program. The Coastal Conservancy awarded the organization a second Explore the Coast grant in March 2016. Additionally, the Conservancy awarded a grant to the Foundation in 2014 for the Aliso Creek Estuary Restoration Planning Project in Orange County managed by the Laguna Ocean Foundation.

## PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$20,000
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	\$25,000
San Diego Gas & Electric	\$20,000
Unified Port of San Diego	\$5,000
Coastal Commission	\$5,000

**Project Total**

**\$75,000**

The expected source of Conservancy funds for this project is the fiscal year 2015/16 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014 (Proposition 1, Water Code § 79700 et seq.). Funds appropriated to the Conservancy derive from Chapter 6 (commencing with § 79730) and may be used “for multi-benefit water quality, water supply, and watershed protection and restoration projects for the watersheds of the state” (Section 79731). Section 79732 identifies specific purposes of Chapter 6 and includes the purpose of protecting and restoring coastal watersheds, including, but not limited to bays, marine estuaries, and nearshore ecosystems (Section 79732(a)(10)).

As required by Proposition 1, the proposed project provides multiple benefits: helping restore San Diego Bay’s wetlands and shoreline, reducing coastal pollution, improving water quality, and assisting with the recovery of migratory bird species using the Pacific Flyway.

In accordance with Section 79707(b), which requires agencies to prioritize “projects that leverage private, federal, or local funding or produce the greatest public benefit”, this project leverages both federal and local funding as noted above.

The proposed project was selected through a competitive grant process under the Conservancy’s *Proposition 1 Grant Program Guidelines* adopted in June 2015 (“Prop 1 Guidelines”). (See Section 79706(a)). The proposed project meets each of the evaluation criteria in the Prop 1 Guidelines as described in further detail in this “Project Financing” section, the “Project Summary” section and in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines” section of this report.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of Division 21, Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270, regarding natural resource enhancement projects.

Consistent with Section 31251, the proposed disbursement would provide funding to a nonprofit agency to undertake activities necessary for the enhancement of San Diego Bay wetlands and shoreline that have been impacted by indiscriminate dredging and filling, improper location of improvements, and human-induced events, and have suffered the loss of natural values.

Section 31252 requires that the area to be restored be identified in a local plan which the Coastal Commission determines to be consistent with the policies and objectives of Division 20 of the Public Resources Code (the Coastal Act). Project activities will take place in the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge, which is not within the jurisdiction of any local government.

However, the area is identified as requiring public action to resolve resource protection problems as described in the Refuge’s Comprehensive Conservation Plan (“CCP”). The Coastal Commission has concurred in the USFWS determination that the CCP will not adversely affect coastal resources, as described in the “Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies” section, below.

In determining the amount of Conservancy funding for this project, the factors identified in Section 31253 have been considered and applied, as described in detail below, in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines” section.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2013 STRATEGIC PLAN  
GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S), AS REVISED JUNE 25, 2015:**

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective B** the proposed project will restore coastal upland and wetland habitat.

Consistent with **Goal 9, Objective A** the proposed project will support an education program that will increase public understanding of coastal resources.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S  
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on October 2, 2014, in the following respects:

**Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:**

*California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report* (Governor's Office of Planning and Research, 2013 Draft): The project is consistent with the report's overall goal "Steward and protect natural and working landscapes", and the sub-goal #6, "Build resilience into natural systems". The proposed project will restore degraded coastal habitats with benefits to wildlife, water quality, and climate change adaptation and will involve long-term stewardship by FWS.

*California Climate Adaptation Strategy/Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan* (California Natural Resources Agency, July 2014): The proposed project is consistent with the broad goal of increasing information sharing and education regarding climate change, specifically sub-goal #2, "Promote public education and outreach on climate change impacts to biodiversity". FWS will create curriculum for the project to educate participants about reducing emissions, conserving water, protecting the environment from sea level rise, and preparing for other climate-related risks.

*California Water Action Plan* (2016 update, developed by California Natural Resources Agency, CalEPA, and California Department of Food and Agriculture): The proposed project is consistent with goal #4, "Protect and restore important ecosystems", in that restoration and associated education activities will address drought, poor water quality, and loss of wildlife and habitat along a stretch of degraded Otay River corridor and San Diego Bay within the Refuge. Methods will include litter abatement, invasive plant removal, and native plant installation, along with water education. Habitat restoration activities will increase habitat resilience and water sustainability.

*California Wildlife Action Plan* (California Department of Fish and Wildlife, 2015 update): This project will make a significant contribution to advancing the California Wildlife Action Plan through working to resolve the major stressors affecting South Coast wildlife, including growth and development, water management issues, degradation of aquatic ecosystems, invasive species, and recreational pressures. Ocean Connectors directly addresses these issues with broad community support and targeted habitat restoration efforts around South San Diego Bay.

*California Aquatic Invasive Species Management Plan* (California Department of Fish and Wildlife, 2008): This project is consistent with Objective #2, “Minimize and prevent the introduction and spread of aquatic invasive species into and throughout California waters”. The project will advance this plan through its focus on invasive species and water pollution. It will involve hand removal of aquatic invasive plant species that grow in the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge, and installation of native plants that will promote wildlife abundance and habitat use. The project also provides community collaborations and education and outreach programs that are directly aligned with this plan.

4. **Support of the public:** The project is supported by the National School District, U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and National Marine Fisheries Service. (See Project Letters, Exhibit 3).
5. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of the City of San Diego, San Diego County.
6. **Need:** The grantee will not have sufficient funding to complete the project without a grant of Conservancy funds.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** San Diego has one of the highest counts of species that appear on the U.S. endangered species list, making it a high priority for conservation. Federally listed species that have been observed within two miles of the project site include the Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*), American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*), and Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*). The site is located on the Pacific Flyway, therefore making it a vital habitat for numerous migratory bird species as well. The restoration of the habitat for the special status species and for migratory birds is of national concern. In addition, project participants will contribute firsthand to restoring vegetation along the Bayshore Bikeway, which benefits many communities in South San Diego County, and which functions as the California Coastal Trail in the area.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The site is close to a shoreline that could be prone to flooding and erosion due to climate change impacts. However, data incorporated into the Sea Level Rise Adaptation Strategy for San Diego Bay indicates that even with a sea level rise of 55 inches, the majority of the site would be above water.

#### **Additional Criteria**

10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project will provide multiple benefits, including reducing coastal pollution, improving water quality, and assisting with the recovery of migratory bird species using the Pacific Flyway.
11. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.

- 14. Readiness:** The grantee and project team are ready to commence the project immediately upon board authorization.
- 15. Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” section above.
- 17. Cooperation:** The proposed project involves close partnership between Ocean Connectors Program, National School District, U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service, NMFS, and the Unified Port District of San Diego.
- 18. Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The site is most vulnerable to drought and species habitat loss. The current drought has led to die-off of native plants, erosion, and reduced biodiversity. The design of the project site will reduce climate change vulnerabilities through installing drought-tolerant native plants in the upland transition area, which will serve multiple purposes for habitat conservation and provide nesting and foraging space for endangered, threatened, and migratory wildlife. In the river corridor and wetland areas, participants will install native plants with a high-tolerance for salt, as inundation is expected to increase. Ocean Connectors is committed to working closely with its partners FWS and the Port to implement adaptive management techniques that can ensure the continued success of the restoration process alongside changing climatic conditions and impacts.
- 19. Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** To minimize greenhouse gas emissions during Ocean Connectors activities, all restoration work will be done by hand, using hand tools rather than machinery. In addition, Ocean Connectors is working with National School District to investigate options for transporting the students on electric-powered school buses. They are working collaboratively to identify sources and secure the funds so that the District can purchase several electric buses, which would allow the entire program audience to be transported efficiently to the site while greatly minimizing the greenhouse gas emissions associated with bus transit. All Ocean Connectors employees, volunteers, and parents attending the restoration events will be encouraged to carpool or utilize public transportation to further minimize greenhouse gas emissions associated with this project.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:** The project does not fall within the jurisdiction of a local coastal program (LCP), but is covered by the Refuge’s CCP. Through the federal consistency review of the CCP, the Coastal Commission agreed that the proposed CCP would not adversely affect coastal resources, concurring with FWS’s 2007 negative determination.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:** The proposed project is categorically exempt from the provisions of CEQA pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15304(d), which exempts minor alteration in land, water, and vegetation within an officially designated wildlife management area. The restoration activities proposed to be undertaken through the project will take place on approximately two acres of the 4,000-acre USFWS San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge. The Refuge, including the proposed project, is covered by a Comprehensive Conservation Plan, which guides wildlife and habitat conservation and restoration and educational activities in the Refuge. The FWS determined in 2007, through National Environmental Policy Act compliance documents, that activities covered by the CCP will not

adversely affect coastal resources. The Coastal Commission in its federal consistency determination concurred with the FWS negative determination.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the proposed project.